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# COMPARATIVE URBAN RESEARCH AND MASS PARTICIPATION RUNNING EVENTS: METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

## Introduction

This paper critically reflects on a research project undertaken from 2008-2009 that explored two of the world's largest mass participation running events (MPREs): The *Great North Run* (GNR) in Newcastle (UK) and the *Great Ethiopian Run* (GER) in Addis Ababa. The project's central aim was twofold. First, to explore how mass participation sporting events can act as vehicles and catalysts for the achievement of a host of goals including: physical activity uptake; charitable giving; urban regeneration and development; attracting investment; city image-building and promotion. Second, to examine the urban governance tensions that can emerge from the use of a time-limited event to realise policy goals. These questions are important as, despite the debate within the growing body of literature on urban sporting "mega-events" (e.g. the Commonwealth Games, Olympics, Football World Cup) on their capacity to generate "significant consequences" for their host cities (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2006: 2), comparatively little attention has been paid to events that fall outside the "mega" label. MPREs may be strictly defined as "athletic events with numerous participants over one period of time" (Ross, 2003: 29), but their temporal reach is often far greater than the event itself. Indeed, MPREs increasingly encompass a repertoire of activities that go beyond the annual event and are designed to galvanise and sustain public support, ensure annual growth in participation levels and develop the "destination brand" of their host cities (Chalip and Costa, 2005). As a consequence therefore, MPREs are strikingly emblematic of a particular repertoire of urban processes and politics that emerge from and feed into a "sport-media-tourism complex" (Nauright, 2004: 1326) that forms an integral part of the cultural life of many cities. They therefore serve as a platform for the exploration of urban politics as well as bringing cities that have not hosted "mega events" into fruitful "dialogue" (Dear, 2005).

This paper explores the conundrums that emerged from the research *process* as a way of adding a new empirical dimension to two conceptual domains. These are, first, a comparative urban research agenda that acknowledges a possible "Southern turn" (Rao, 2006, McFarlane, 2008; Legg and Macfarlane, 2008) away from Global and World Cities towards "a new optics...which sees all cities as ordinary" (Robinson, 2008: 75). And second, the large canon of work that explores the interrelationships between sporting (mega-) events and urban governance, development and regeneration agendas (Andranovitch *et al*, 2001; Berking and Neckel, 1993; Chalkley and Essex, 1999; Cornelissen, 2004; 2008; Hiller, 2004; Kidd, 2008; Pillay and Bass, 2008). The paper thus uses these conundrums as vantage points for deeper engagement with the complex urban processes and politics that shape events and, in turn, determine their impacts. To

do this, it first offers an overview of MPREs, before turning to a more detailed exploration of the GER and the GNR. It then briefly sets out the rationale for the research project and its planned methodological framework. Moving from the intentional to the actual; it then discusses three conundrums that emerged from the fieldwork experience. The first reflects on the issues of access posed by undertaking research so dependent on corporate co-operation, an unavoidable challenge given the integration of MPREs within a global political economy of sport (Naurught, 2004). The second discusses the problems inherent in recruiting race participants and the strategies used to mitigate these. The third dwells on the question of how to most efficiently and effectively document and experience a unique “time-limited occurrence” which, “when it is over, can never be perfectly replicated” (Getz, 2004: 411). Indeed, recent geographical considerations of the event have favoured the conceptual domains of “non-representational theory”, performativity and enactment (see Dewsbury, 2000; McCormack, 2004; Kraftl and Horton, 2007), at the expense of reflection on the more pragmatic considerations facing lone researchers in the field (see Sugden, 2007). The paper ultimately argues that reflection on the *practical* considerations of event research can help yield deep insights into the significance, value and meaning that the races under question gain from and hold for their host cities.

### **Mass participation running events**

Running for health and fitness emerged in the late 1960s as a predominantly male, middle-class pursuit to reduce the risk of heart attacks (Gillick 1984; Latham 2013). By the 1970s, jogging had broadened its appeal to men and women concerned as much with their psychological wellbeing as their physical appearance and health. The MPRE emerged through efforts to modernise the traditional marathon format and, because of this, New York marathon founder Fred Lebow is often held up as the originator of the format (Burfoot 2007). Lebow transformed the New York Marathon from an event with a hundred (male) competitors lapping Central Park to one which allowed women, attracted sponsorship from Olympic airlines and therefore had sufficient prize money to attract elite athletes (Kuscsik 1977). The TV-ready combination of elite runners and a reworked the route that took in the iconic landscapes of all five boroughs brought huge public interest, prestige and, in turn, even greater prize money. Now, two million people regularly line the marathon route to watch the urban spectacle. While elite athletes are a major draw, it is the narratives of motivation, perseverance and triumph by the “masses” that form the vital human interest component of MPREs. In 1982, the *Association of International Marathons and Distance Races* (AIMS) had just 28 members. By 2009, it certified over 270 road races of varying lengths in destinations ranging from Antarctica, to Kigali in Rwanda and San Francisco. While MPREs remain predominantly a phenomenon of the Global North, an increasing array of events in the Global South are making it into the Runners’ World “20 international races to do before you die” list. These include: the

Comrades (ultra) Marathon in South Africa; the Marathon des Sables in Morocco; the Great wall Marathon in China and the Inca Trail Marathon in Peru. The climb in the number of MPRE races and their participants is clear evidence of their intoxicating mix. In 2012 for example, 209,000 people are said to have completed the World Record-breaking 'Kahit Isang Araw Lang Unity Run' whose main event takes place in the SM Mall of Asia in Manila, Philippines. Other popular MPREs include the 110,000-strong San Francisco's 'Bay to Breakers' run, the 'Cursa de el Corte Ingles' in Barcelona which attracted 109,000 people in 2012 and Sydney's 'City to Surf' race with 86,696 participants.

Taking part in many of these events requires some training for the moderately fit, but for the nominally fit, it may require more concerted devotion to a fitness regime, the uptake of which often provides the motivation for participation. Unlike the 'cultural symbol of almost superhuman endurance' that is the marathon (Reischer 2001, 25), MPREs tend to average around 10km in length and are therefore achievable for almost all participants. The mass appeal of MPREs is complex and multidimensional. For many, events are used to motivate adherence to a longer-term fitness programme. This may be driven by the desire to lose weight or simply improve health and body image. Many races are now tied into charitable causes, with coveted places only available to those raising funds for charities. In turn, charities pay the organisers a sliding fee per place depending on the level of marketing and hospitality. Thus while running for a charitable cause may motivate many to take part (Nettleton and Hardey 2006) and is the sole mission of events such as the Susan G. Komen 'Race for the Cure' (breast cancer, US) or 'Race for Life' (Cancer Research, UK); raising money and running as part of a charity team may also be the only realistic route into the most popular events. The spectacle and 'urban carnival' of MPREs (Waitt 2008) can be intoxicating and addictive and, in this sense, MPREs exemplify the idea of sport as participatory theatre expounded by Barthes (2007). Events are rendered even more theatrical by the geographical backdrops of many races. Urban MPREs are thus often distinguished by their visual choreography. They often have stunning start lines, are designed to pass as many iconic landmarks as possible, and have suitably impressive finish lines. Such choreography, however, requires planning, cost and coordination for race organisers as well as the multiple state agencies charged with road closures, rubbish collection, managing public transport and traffic and ensuring participant health and safety. It is at this organisational level that tensions emerge between the short-termism of the event and the discourses of sustained impact that are often invoked to justify state support.

MPREs thus represent a particular form of "urban spectacle" that "that involve[s] capitalist markets, sets of social relations, and flows of commodities, capital, technology, cultural forms and people across borders" (Gotham, 2005: 227). As such, exploring the tensions between race organisers and host cities brought to the surface in these relationships, flows and networks illuminates specific realms of urban

politics that have resonance far beyond race day. In turn, these politics lend a broader significance to MPREs that makes their examination particularly valuable to urban researchers. It is therefore important to note here that the surge in MPREs also reflects the relative ease with which the format can be translated between cities, from developed to developing countries (Nauright, 2004) and appended to a series of diverse and often intensely policy-relevant goals (Getz, 2004). Their popularity is further enhanced by the fact that these events are frequently “no longer discrete and isolated...but are rationally produced and managed by bureaucratic organisations for instrumental purposes” (Gotham, 2005: 227). Global marketing firm IMG, for example, runs 13 MPREs in locations as diverse as Dubai, Basel and San Francisco. While the multinational uptake of the MPRE format may facilitate their transcontinental translation, it also has the effect of rendering events far more opaque from a methodological perspective. This is just one of the conundrums that will be explored in this paper.

### **The GER, GNR and the project rationale**

Despite the very obvious differences between Newcastle and Addis Ababa, both are tightly enmeshed in a global political economy of running and runners. Alongside coffee, long-distance runners are perhaps Ethiopia’s most lucrative export, with Haile Gebresellasie, Kenenisa Bekele, Tirunesh Dibaba and Dire Tunda all holding one or more world records. Despite the country’s poor sports facilities, the popularity of running has surged since Abebe Bekila became the first African to win an Olympic medal, taking home gold for Ethiopia at Rome in 1960. Spotting an Olympic champion is particularly common in Addis as Ethiopian athletes prefer to train in the 3000m altitudes of their home country. The growing allure of running to Ethiopians is a facet of the sport’s mass popularity among both men and women, its low cost, the ability to run without formal training facilities and its consequent accessibility (Bale 2004). The appeal of the huge wealth that international running success can bring is also clear. More important is the relative wealth that even limited success can bring in one of Africa’s poorest countries. Appearance fees and a few race wins are usually enough to build a house and support an extended family, which makes athletics an extremely attractive route out of poverty.

Newcastle has also made its own imprint on the world of global athletics. With the success of the Gateshead Harriers Athletics Club in the 1960s and 1970s came some of the UK’s best athletes including Mike McLeod and Steve Cram. The Gateshead stadium has also long played host to international athletic meetings and the “Great North Way” - a one mile route along the Quayside – has become the UK’s first permanent interactive timing system, allowing any jogger with a chip and downloadable computer program to monitor their training. Moreover, as the home of former Olympic athlete and world record holder, Brendan Foster, Newcastle has given the world some of its most successful and commodified

mass participation sporting events. Foster's sports marketing company, *Nova International*, boasts a portfolio of 20 branded adult and junior *Great Run* events across the UK, Ireland and now Australia. From comparatively small beginnings with 12,000 participants in 1981, the GNR as Nova's flagship half marathon event has now grown to 52,000 competitors. In a fortuitous twist linking Addis and Newcastle, both the men's and women's GNR elite races were won by Ethiopians in 2008. Furthermore, Nova International's latest venture, the Great Australia Run in Melbourne was won by Haile Gebresellase in 2008.

Both the GER and GNR share a common lineage back to *Nova International*. More than this, with the GNR branded "the most iconic half marathon on the planet" and the GER as "Africa's biggest road race", the events represent significant dates in the running calendars as well as major forces in the urban politics, developmental and regeneration strategies of both cities. In 2008, the GNR had over 400 charity partners, with runners' efforts raising over £8 million for an array of causes from Guide Dogs to Alzheimer's. Beyond its significant charity role, the GNR (through its associated web resource [Greatactivity.org](http://Greatactivity.org)) also seeks to encourage the sustained uptake of physical activity among its participants and act as a catalyst for comprehensive lifestyle changes that go far beyond race day and echo current UK government health priorities (DH, 2008). The event thus claims public health relevance, as well as being an important component of Newcastle's urban and regional regeneration at the time of the research (One NorthEast, 2006: 130). In contrast, the GER's main objective has been to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS and the Millennium Development Goal (MDGs) (see UN, 2003; Kidd, 2008). This has been helped through the race's sponsorship by UNICEF, German Development Organisation GTZ and DKT international, an HIV/AIDS NGO based in Washington DC which provides 90% of all condoms distributed in Ethiopia (DKT, 2009). For these organisations, the race is a powerful forum to disseminate their health promotion materials in race packs and health promotion activities (see figure 1). This is an important channel of communication in a country that is deeply conservative, has very low rates of contraceptive use and an HIV prevalence rate of 2.1% (UNICEF, 2009). While the GNR has an important role in showcasing Newcastle and Tyneside, the GER also serves a significant image-building purpose for both the city of Addis and for Ethiopia more broadly. The race is therefore harnessed as a vehicle through which to showcase an alternative image of a nation known, in the main, for its poverty and famine (World Bank, 2006; Bale and Sang, 1996).

Building from this, the project upon which this paper reflects aimed to compare and contrast the use of both events as vehicles through which to achieve specific social policy goals. To do so, the research framework started with two assumed constants: a single event type (i.e. MPRE) and parent organisation responsible for its production, marketing and organisation (i.e. Nova International). While the *Great Run*

brand is primarily concerned with widening public participation in event-led physical activity, both the GER and GNR also have a clear list of their own policy-specific objectives. To explore these, the project adopted three key methodological approaches. First, semi-structured interviews in Newcastle and Addis Ababa with two main stakeholder groups: the race organisers (Nova and its local partners) and city-scale government/ public sector officials charged with harnessing the race's participatory and educational potential. Second, informal interviews and online discussions with race participants to explore the motivations for and experiences of participating in such events. Third, participant observation of the GNR and GER race teams, as well as participation in and visual documentation of both races. Together, these methodological approaches were designed to examine the organisation of the events, their relationship with key stakeholders and partners, participants' motivations, the potential effects and outcomes of participation and the direct experience of the event. The rest of this paper will reflect on the methodological strengths and limitations of this approach, as well as the lessons learnt for future research on events.

### **Methodological conundrums**

The comparative urban research field is notable for its lack of methodological reflexivity and is riddled with "issues of organizational identity, theoretical coherence, and methodological integrity" (Ward, 2008: 406). These issues are engrained by researcher unwillingness to engage with them on an empirical level. Yet, despite this reticence, it has been repeatedly recognized that "comparative research is obviously not easy under any circumstances" (Bourne, 2008: 178). This is especially true when dealing with issues such as incongruities of scale, the challenges of finding and justifying "functional equivalence" (Denters and Mossberger, 2006: 565), the compatibility and accessibility of data sources (Dear, 2005: 247) and different cultural meanings and contexts (Kantor and Savitch, 2005: 137) across case study cities. Yet, these obstacles are rarely detailed in practice. This omission starts to seem particularly glaring when undertaking comparisons through event research, a realm that, with few exceptions (see Kraftl and Horton, 2007) has also escaped any significant degree of methodological reflection. This is a dual absence which may limit movement towards the latest call for a more inclusive, cosmopolitan and multiplicitous approach to comparative urban studies, that goes "beyond the labelling, categorising and ranking of cities" (Legg and Macfarlane, 2008: 7) to consider a wider range of rationales for urban research. However, rather than viewing these difficulties as simply limiting an authentic comparative agenda, this paper explores these conundrums as an additional means by which urban politics unfold and are revealed.

### ***Access and stakeholder interviews***

One of the central justifications for choosing the GER and GNR as case studies was that, given that both appear to be marketed by *Nova International* under the *Great Run* brand; this should have facilitated institutional access by having only one primary gatekeeper to securing stakeholder interviews (see Feldman *et al*, 2006 for a full discussion of “access” in research). However, as the research progressed, two issues came to light. The first was the deeply ambiguous relationship of the GER with Nova and the second, the double-bind of a research project over-reliant on the cooperation of one institution, even when this is rendered inevitable by an increasingly corporatized MPRE field. While it has been acknowledged that “one of the many problems facing researchers aiming at in-depth qualitative case study research into organisations is the issue of gaining access, since considerable time is often spent on this task” (Okumus *et al*, 2007: 7; see also Feldman, 2006), there is relatively little discussion of the creative solutions needed to mitigate restricted access (Smith 2006). While much of the methodological literature may treat access as an unproblematic and self-evident research stage (Campbell, 2006), in reality, the *process* of gaining access and managing the failure of this endeavour, may be the central pivot around which the success of qualitative research rotates. The creative processes of securing access can also, fortuitously, shed light on institutional and local politics as well as the tensions that exist within and between corporate governance structures.

MPREs may usually only occur once a year, but they represent the culmination of a cycle of preparation and planning. Thus, in an ideal world, they would be subject to the kind of long-term, sustained research which is now increasingly constrained by university commitments that extend into the summer and transform “quick and dirty” research into a necessity rather than simply a shortcut (Pain and Francis, 2003). In this case, the timescale is even more constrained as both the GNR and GER take place during term time, meaning that the research visit to Addis in particular had to be exceptionally snatched at just under two weeks in both 2008 and 2009. This timeframe left little room to find and build up contacts while in Addis. This research stage was necessary to build the trust and rapport needed to access government officials in a country that has come in for increasing international criticism for its domestic and foreign policies, and its aggressive treatment of academics, foreign journalists and NGOs (Gagnon, 2008; Dudge, 2009). To mitigate these time constraints, strategic stakeholders were identified from race sponsoring organisations and snowballing techniques used to identify further interviewees on existing contacts’ personal recommendations. In the case of the GER, a tight network of facilitative actors from across the diplomatic, international and NGO sectors have built up around the race team to provide an effective interface with government officials. This does not help gain access to government, but does ensure that the event is, if not outright encouraged by politicians, it is at least endured. The aspiration to interview city officials in Addis therefore had to be traded for interviews with the partner NGOs, supporting embassies and international development organisations that fund and support the GER. These



interviews revealed the GER to be a significant charity fund raising exercise as well as raising the visibility of partner NGOs. It also, however, highlighted the race's cultural and political role for its largely middle class participants. Not only is it an important annual social event, but it is also one of the few public outlets for people to express their significant political frustrations without fear of reprisal.

The easy and welcoming access to the GER race team and their insightful narratives of capacity building and autonomy creation more than compensated for the harried nature of interviews, which unavoidably had to be carried out at the most inconvenient time of the year for the organisers. The success of the interviews was overwhelmingly due to the exceptional helpfulness of the General Manager of the race office, who acted as the kind of "facilitative" gatekeeper you can only hope to encounter (Campbell *et al*, 2006). The story was not the same in Newcastle as, while Nova was happy to provide access passes to observe the race and talk to volunteers on the day, they were evasive about granting permission to interview their Newcastle employees. This was justified by the organisation as they already conduct significant consumer insight research of their own through regular surveys of race participants. Interviews with city, government and public sector officials charged with realising the same goals as those purportedly addressed by the race were far easier to arrange. In Newcastle, interviewees drew fascinating contrasts between the rhetoric of "mass participation" employed by the GNR and their "take to the streets" training website's call for people to "get active" and the reality of low rates of physical activity uptake by the general population. They also highlighted the irony of this disjuncture when comparing the huge budget of the GNR with the ever-diminishing funds devoted to sports and physical activity promotion in the city. Access was fairly simple as respondents *wanted* to vent frustrations. Like the GER, the GNR is one of the most significant features of Newcastle's annual calendar of events, is televised live by the BBC and watched by millions. Places in the race are hugely over-subscribed and it is of exceptional local importance to the region's tourism industry and broader economy. Nova is also a significant local employer. Speaking out of turn against the GNR or Nova is politically problematic. Thus, the GNR and GER exemplify, in very different ways, the multiple tensions that characterise the governance of MPREs that, in turn, have profound implications for the research process.

### ***Finding and identifying participants***

The MPRE sector across Europe and North America is becoming increasingly saturated and competition between events to attract participants and charities is fierce, necessitating heavy investment in marketing and publicity. Market saturation is however still a long way off in the Global South and MPREs are mushrooming as demand grows. This is especially so as governments recognise the potential offered by events in showcasing domestic athletic talent, harnessing the spending potential of a growing numbers of "sports tourists" travelling the world to compete in events with particular cachet (see Green and Jones,

2005), as a multi-faceted tool of development (UN, 2003) and as an attractive leisure event for a growing urban middle class. The geographic expansion of the MPRE format has also been accompanied by a transnational transfer of skills and tools designed to facilitate, in Nova's language, the art of race "production". Within this political economy of MPREs, the event is not just the race, but rather a constellation of associated goods, services and technological aids. For example, the GNR online registration system records personal details such as postcode, gender and age. It then generates a race number linked to an in-shoe timing chip that means that participants can search for their race time online and then purchase any professional photos linked to their finish time and race number. Furthermore, once registered, participants gain access to the online "training room" at the *Great Activity* site ([www.greatactivity.org](http://www.greatactivity.org)) where they can design a personalised training plan, keep an online progress report, create a blog, download mobile software that sends training reminder text messages and uses GPS (Global Positioning Satellite) technology to monitor average speed, calories burnt and distance run. These integrated "motivational technologies" represent significant Unique Selling Points (USP) for prospective participants. The pressure to enhance the USP in this increasingly crowded marketplace is further driven by online race ranking and feedback forums. For example, *Runner's World* magazine asks its website users to score races by categories including: scenery; personal best potential; atmosphere; organisation and value. The use of technology is also changing the nature of the event. Now, races are pre-experienced online as much as they are undertaken in reality. Indeed, blogs and forums forge a community of participants who, in turn, share in their collective endeavours through personalised, expert and technology-driven training routines.

For researchers, these technologies also offer a data source rich with potential for undertaking the kind of 'virtual ethnography' (Hine 2008) increasingly being used to uncover the meaning and values of social lives increasingly lived through and shaped by the web. For example, in this case, the Great Run web forums were used to post topic discussions about participants' reasons for taking part in MPREs and pre and post-race blogs used to delve into questions of participant motivation and engagement. In addition, and given the inaccessibility of personal contact information from the registration database, these forums also acted as a means of (virtual) focus group recruitment. The quality of discussion that emerged from these channels varied and often took numerous prompts (or "bumps" up forum lists) to elicit replies. In contrast to the instantaneity promised by the internet, research conducted online can be slow and characterised by episodic flurries of conversation. The sample is also unavoidably skewed towards those who seek out such forums as they are new to the event and looking for further information and support. In this case, most respondents were taking part in the GNR for the first time. This method therefore targets a limited sample, but overcomes the appreciable difficulties in recruiting participants who come from all across the UK and far beyond. Online fora can illicit valuable insights into motivations and

experiences, but often without the richness and detail that comes from face-to-face discussion. It is therefore often a shorthand solution, but one that has demonstrable strengths.

One of goals of the GER that emerged through interviews and through analysis of publicity materials is the ambition to build the skills set of the Ethiopian race organisation team. The GER is the team's annual showcase event, but throughout the year they travel to towns across Ethiopia hosting a number of much smaller races to raise awareness of the importance of women's education. Since 2011, additional races to raise awareness of the objectives of the MDGs have also taken place. Through these endeavours, the team also refine the MPRE format for events organisation and delivery outside the capital where resources are far scarcer and capacity much more limited. Yet, the GER's capacity-building aspirations remain restricted by a series of extraneous factors that ultimately hindered the recruitment race participants. The lack of market liberalization in the Ethiopian telecommunication industry means that the registration process for Ethiopian nationals relies on in-person race pack pick-ups at one of eight branches of the Commercial bank of Ethiopia in Addis. While this does ensure that race participation is open to anyone able to pay the 45 Birr or £4 fee (n.b. in 2013 the fee had risen to 100 Birr) and is not dependent on having access to the internet, which is expensive, can be slow and is prone to crashing for days on end, it does mean that participant information is not recorded and race shirts are frequently transferred or sold on, such is the huge demand to take part. This sits in contrast to the highly efficient online race registration system for non-nationals who now pay £35 to take part and can pick up their race shirts at the "GER expo" at the Addis Hilton. The dual system demonstrates the scale of demand for the MPRE "experience" by running tourists as well as the significant number of non-nationals from Addis Ababa's vast international organisation and NGO community who take part in the event every year. The clear distinction between the formality of the international online registration system and the local, cash economy of informal shirt transactions mirrors the social and spatial distance between Addis' international and aid community and the majority of its urban residents. The city's international quarter along the Bole Road to the airport, for instance, has mains electricity, waste services and reliable broadband. This is in sharp contrast to the rest of the city where generators remain a necessity, even if they are largely unaffordable. The disparity between the middle-class tenor of the event and the urban poverty of Addis is brought into clear focus by the opportunity the race offers the city's innumerable street kids to collect and sell on runners' discarded plastic water bottles (figure 2). While this is an extremely small-scale activity, for those kids it nonetheless represents important informal contribution to their income amid precious few other opportunities.

### ***Pragmatics and the problems of fitness***

Once in the field, the failings of the events literature to reflect on how best to *experience* and *represent* a running event become all too clear (for an exception see Sugden, 2007). Indeed, recruiting participants from the GER and GNR seemed simple when compared to the task of visually documenting and participating in the race for two main reasons. First, the original research project timescale covered one year from September 2008 to September 2009, within which the GER and GNR would each take place only once. This allowed only one day to experience and make an unfamiliar event meaningful<sup>1</sup>. Second, races have a clear start, middle and end. These stages represent different phases of the MPRE organisation and participant experience. The start is used to motivate participants and generate an energetic and carnivalesque atmosphere with mass warm-up exercises, music (see figure 3) and celebrity appearances. The middle is the race itself, where determination to finish, inner strength, camaraderie, entertainment along the route, fancy dressed participants, spectator support, water stations, snacks and helpful marshals help participants overcome their fatigue. By the end, the finish line gantry is in sight, medals are claimed and runners gather to recount their experiences. The event cannot be meaningfully reduced to any of these components, but rather represents the holistic and intensely personal experience of any number of these elements in combination. In the case of the GER, experiencing the start, middle and end was possible by taking part over the 10km course – a challenge in and of itself given that Addis is the third highest capital city in the world at 2,500m elevation. Given that the GNR is 13.1 miles long, taking part was a more problematic research strategy, despite sporadic training attempts.

The GNR's iconic start is the A167 central motorway in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. Nova provided an 'access all areas' pass that granted entry to the race start area with the journalists, photographers, TV reporters, elite athletes, club runners, wheelchair race participants and the host of celebrities and politicians that help secure TV coverage for the GNR. Time at the race start provided the ideal opportunity to conduct informal interviews with race volunteers during the long build up to the race, while thousands of participants slowly made their way to colour-coded starting lines organized by expected race completion time. This space also permitted direct participant-observation of the transnational networks of athletes, celebrities and politicians that move between international events. While the GER cannot pay large appearance fees – although Paula Radcliffe was guest of honour in 2009 - both events remain important springboards to market and develop local athletic talent. Lack of training aside, it would have been functionally impossible to enter the GNR as part of the 'masses' who have a start area at least half a mile away (and then at least half a mile long) and also experience this key element of the complex matrix that composes the commodified and corporatized MPRE (see figure 4).

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<sup>1</sup> This was almost completely dashed in Addis by the threat of cancellation after a terror attack warning was reportedly received by the Ethiopian Government and all US embassy employees were forbidden from taking part in the event.

The choices continued into the middle and end of the race. In the end, a decision was made to document and experience the start and end of the GNR and to experience the GER *as participant*. Thus, the GER was spent amid a wave of fellow participants surging up hills, dodging man-sized drains, choking on pollution, sweating, trying to document the experience through photographs while being pushed along by the crowd, listening to musical performances, observing collective anti-government protests in front of public buildings and documenting the remarkable security presence (see figure 5). By contrast, the mid-race GNR experience was a mad dash back to Haymarket Metro station to get to the race finish in South Shields. While this was the quickest way to get the considerable distance from start to finish, it also demonstrated the degree to which the GNR temporarily reconfigures Tyneside's urban infrastructure to make the event possible. Public buses are re-routed to get participants and spectators back to the city from South Shields, used to transport participants' bags from start to finish (one of the very few MPREs to do this) and extra ferries are laid on between South and North Shields to ensure that people can get back to the city. That public transport should be put to the service of a private event not only makes it possible, but also adds value to the race experience, ensuring the brand loyalty that brings the masses back to the *Great Run* experience year after year.

While there were clear methodological limitations in not taking part in the race, one of the advantages of experiencing the event as spectator was that it enabled greater observation of and engagement with the "event system" in its totality. This system is composed of a vast constellation of services including post-race massages, sports injury clinics and the substantial corporate hospitality areas used to host celebrities, elite athletes, corporate guests and charity runners. Thus, observing and experiencing these collective elements transformed my perspective of the temporal and spatial scale at which the "race experience" is generated. In contrast to the GER where many people take part without an official race shirt and there are fights to grab a coveted medal at the race end, the GNR is a precisely orchestrated "experience" with every element of the race "production" choreographed and managed to ensure people always return to the *Great Run* brand. In a sense therefore, while not running in the GNR compromised an initial research design predicated on participation in both the GER and GNR, in experiencing the events in such different ways, their similarities and contrasts were perhaps illuminated in greater depth. Within the sports event literature, the question of whether or indeed *how* to take part is barely discussed. This then underplays the inherent contingency and partiality of event research in which lone researchers must effectively choose between a series of relatively limited vantage points. If events create and orchestrate the necessary conditions for intense personal experiences, then researching these conditions is inescapably contingent on the many practical considerations discussed here. These are more often than not extraneous to the event itself, but the process of navigating these pragmatic concerns can actually deepen the interrogation of the relationship between the event setting and its organisational processes.

## Conclusion

MPREs are growing consistently in their global popularity and geographic reach, so much so that they have become an almost ubiquitous part of the cultural and sporting calendar for many cities. However, as an object of research, they present significant and grossly under-explored methodological conundrums. These are compounded by the limited time available to many academics to conduct fieldwork, the episodic nature of events and their huge scale, which mean that experiencing them in their entirety is an impossible task for any one individual. Set against the backdrop of a booming MPRE industry, fieldwork reveals itself to be a “networked process” (Reid-Henry, 2003: 120) that relies on bringing together and making sense of actors, concepts, ideas, political strategies and urban governance within and across diverse places. This process also reveals networks of its own that link elite runners, mass participants, city officials, political figures, TV sports commentators, journalists, diplomats, sponsoring companies, tour agencies, sports management companies and talent scouts, charities and development organisations and NGOs in a deeply entrepreneurial system. This system, moreover, threatens to reorient the relationship between sports provision and the city into a series of discrete, privately-run and owned events, sanctioned by an overwhelming belief in the power of participation. A detailed consideration of this networking of research sites and actors further lends weight to the idea that MPREs “are sites of struggle where powerful urban economic and political interests are often forced to defend what they would prefer to have taken for granted” (Gotham, 2005: 236). In Addis, the “struggle” is a palpable affair and takes an exceptionally visceral form with participants chanting anti-government slogans and high levels of visible, armed state security present at all times throughout the race (see figure 5). Interestingly, even though the methodological and practical challenges encountered during the research highlighted the differences between Newcastle and Addis, the GER and GNR actually entwine the two cities within a transnational economy of running and runners. The meaning and significance of this entwinement for the North East of England and Ethiopia remain, however, largely incomparable.

Addis and Newcastle are rarely encountered within the urban studies literature. The cities are also not part of the urban repertoire of the events literature. Yet, they still offer much of interest to urbanists and the study of events. Addis is undergoing massive urban development, in-migration and population increase - a situation which has already produced a rise in poverty levels (Dercon *et al*, 2008: 10). Newcastle was, until fairly recently, the locus of significant urban regeneration efforts and strategic funding allocation in a bid to channel investment, infrastructure and job creation to some of the most deprived parts of the city. Thus, in both cases, the MPRE has served as a form of civic boosterism, forming part of a suite of associated cultural events aimed to educate, instil pride, enthusiasm and an ethic of participation. In both cases, the race has extended into a huge weekend festival, demonstrating the significant capacity and local political influence wielded by the race teams. The *Great Run* format seems

unstoppable in its geographic expansion and MPREs loaded with city-specific messaging are now being gradually appropriated across Africa, the Gulf States (Dubai's Standard Chartered Marathon is, unsurprisingly, billed as "the Planet's Richest"), the Indian subcontinent (see Cram, 2006) and South East Asia. This growth does not, thankfully, seem to be producing homogeneity. Instead, the particularity of place, the unique landscapes of the race course, local culture and the organisational capacities of the race team offer distinct USPs that draws participants hungry for new experiences and challenges. For researchers of events, the methodological hurdles will always remain as long as MPREs snake their way along a road race course, but the conceptual rewards from uncovering their significance to and shaping of urban politics are well worth the temporary physical exertion.

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Figure 1 - The Great Ethiopian Run's HIV/AIDS awareness raising 'man with a condom hat' (Photo: author, 2008)



**Figure 2 - Ethiopian group 'The Three Brothers' perform before the GER Children's Race. Concerts, aerobics and guest appearances are common tactics used to transform a running race into both a *specacle* and an *event* (photo: author, 2008)**





Figure 3 - kids collecting discarded water bottles for resale (photo: Author's own, 2009)



Figure 4 - elite athletes at the GNR race start. The hoards of race participants can be seen making their way slowly to their start area in the background (photo: author, 2008).





**Figure 5 - The start of the 2008 GER in Meskel Square, Addis. Armed military police can be seen on the terrace of the building to the right of the photo (photo: author, 2008)**